

Are you ready for Christmas yet?

I probably shouldn't admit this out loud, but I will. It isn't easy for me to get ready for Christmas, to really feel it in my heart, whatever Christmas may feel like.

Christmas for me is a busy season. It is getting bulletins ready. It is checking details at church. It is planning for three, four, five or six services so, hopefully, you will come and experience the joy and wonder of this season.

Sometimes I have spent so much time worrying about the details of Church that the Services have come and gone and I wonder, what happened? Where did Christmas go?

I can get so caught up in taking care of Christmas at church that I am pretty worthless when it comes to helping out at home; getting presents, cleaning the house, making sure the laundry gets done, the food purchased and prepared.

Usually our family Christmas letter ends up not being a Christmas letter at all, but a New Year's Letter or a Valentines letter, or an Easter Letter and one year it was even a July 4th letter. That was actually kind of nice because it took care of two years at once - you know, late for one year but early for the next.

Are you ready for Christmas? Not just with the stuff, but with your heart. Are you ready for Christmas?

This last week, I was out in the store getting some last minute Christmas items with Debbie. We had gone to Target to pick up pictures. We were on our way out, \$200 later when it happened.

In fact, we were checking out. Debbie was paying the bill. I was standing in the aisle, beside her with a cart full of stuff for Christmas, when I heard a voice. Because I was watching Debbie and we were visiting with the check-out person, the voice didn't register.

When we were done checking out and the voice walked by me muttering some not very Christmassy and certainly not repeatable in church words did I realize the voice was talking to me. It was a lady who I didn't know was even waiting for me to move. And she certainly let me know of her displeasure.

I wanted to say, "I'm sorry I was in your way, why didn't you ask me to move?" But she was moving too fast away from me after her verbal barrage. I wanted to say, "I didn't know I was in your way." But she was moving too fast away from me after her verbal barrage. I wanted to say, "I am so sorry. It was tough to get around the store tonight. It was kind of a mixture between a NASCAR race and a demolition derby." But she was moving too fast away from me after her verbal barrage.

All I could get out was, "I hope you have a Merry Christmas."

I don't think the Christmas spirit had touched her yet. Has it touched you? Are you ready for Christmas yet?

Even our Christmas story is filled with people who struggled to experience the Christmas spirit. We meet Mary and Joseph, who are forced to interrupt their life, along with the rest of the nation to travel to Bethlehem because the Governor of the empire wanted them registered.

This is a story of upheaval. This is a story of inconveniences. There was no room in a house or in an inn. There was only room in a barn. What a place to have a baby? Most women in this room, and the men who love them wouldn't stand for the unsanitary conditions of a barn as a place to give birth. But there it was. There it happened.

But I guess that is life. Life happens. In the midst of whether we are ready or not. And this Christmas story from Luke reminds us that God chooses to come into this world, in surprising, unexpected ways. God comes. God invades. God births.

And with that birth comes the announcement to shepherds and others (even you and me) who are out in the cold and dark. "A Savior has just been born. God is here. God cares about you. Peace to all on earth." That is

the message. That is the hope. That is the Spirit that I long to experience each year.

One of my favorite stories of Christmas is about a man who had a hard time catching the Christmas Spirit too. You see, Mike hated Christmas, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it, the overspending . . . the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma-the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else.

Knowing he felt this way, Mike's wife decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. She reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way. Here is how she tells the story.

"Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior H.S level at the school he attended; and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church, mostly black. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford. Well, we ended up walloping them.

"We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn't acknowledge defeat. Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly. 'I wish just one of them could have won,' he said. 'They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them.' Mike loved kids - all kids - and he knew them, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came.

"That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from

me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years.

"For each Christmas, I followed the tradition---one year sending a group of mentally handicapped children to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on. The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure.

"In the fall of last year, Mike died from cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. Our tradition will continue."

I love that story. It is a story of that captures for me what Christmas is all about. It is about giving and sharing with each other and a world that is hurting, because God loves us, cares about us, and wants to share with us the greatest gift of all.

Are you ready for Christmas yet?

May we remember to celebrate the gift of Jesus born into our midst. In the hope Jesus offers us. Amen.